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UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON STRADDLING
FISH STOCKS AND HIGHLY MIGRATORY FISH
STOCKS
Sixth session
New York, 24 July-4 August 1995

STATEMENT MADE BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE CONFERENCE AT THE OPENING OF THE SIXTH SESSION, HELD ON 24 JULY 1995

1. I welcome you to the sixth session of the United Nations Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. The Conference has agreed to conclude its work at this session by adopting an agreement for the conservation and management of straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks.

2. In previous sessions I have highlighted the state of world fisheries and noted that some 70 per cent of world fish stocks have been depleted by overfishing. As we enter the final phase of this Conference, it is sobering to realize that, despite the best efforts and intentions of the international community over the past two decades and more, there has been, in fact, very little improvement in the state of world fisheries conservation and management. There is an urgent need to address the underlying problems on all fronts if production declines in marine capture fisheries are to be reversed.

3. At the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development, held at Rio de Janeiro, national leaders committed themselves to seeking a better world where natural resources were harvested for the benefit of all in a sustainable and environmentally safe manner. This Conference has had to deal with the fact that fishing, both on the high seas and within zones of national jurisdiction, must be more effectively controlled if the sustainability of the world's fishery resources is to be assured.

4. We will have gone a long way towards achieving that objective in this Conference if we agree upon concrete measures that translate into strong and sound fisheries conservation and management practice by all States in all areas with respect to straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks.

5. During the 1970s, when the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was being negotiated, there was a widely held expectation that the introduction of extended jurisdiction and more clearly defined rules for the harvesting of marine resources would lead to marked improvements in fisheries conservation and management. However, it has to be acknowledged that those improvements have not yet materialized and the 1982 Convention has yet to be implemented effectively. We have now been afforded a unique opportunity to pave the way towards its effective implementation.

6. The political dimension of fisheries conservation and management has until now been underestimated. Fisheries management requires unpopular decisions to be made concerning limiting catch and effort in fisheries to sustainable levels. Many Governments have had difficulty in addressing conservation and management issues because the decisions required have major commercial and political ramifications.

7. It was not foreseen at the time of the development of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea that many Governments would increase subsidies for the fishing industry in the way that they have done for operations both within zones under national jurisdiction and on the high seas. Subsidies for boat-building and fishing operations have masked the real cost of fishing and have led to expansion of fishing activity well beyond the capacity of the world's fisheries resources.

8. The regime that we are constructing through this Conference will provide a framework for States to confront the reductions in catch and effort that will be necessary for fisheries to have a sustainable future and to make an effective contribution to world food security for present and future generations.

9. I would like to acknowledge the extent to which all participants have recognized the seriousness of the issues before this Conference and the heavy responsibility that we collectively bear in that regard. We have worked hard to find common solutions. These are now reflected in the draft agreement.

10. I am particularly grateful to those States that have made special efforts since the last session of our Conference to help to advance our work. In my closing statement at the last session I encouraged delegations to undertake inter-sessional consultations in order to facilitate agreement on any remaining issues. I also indicated that I would myself coordinate and consult with delegations in the preparation for this session. As in previous sessions I feel it is proper, in the interests of transparency, to report to the Conference on the outcome of my consultations.

11. In this regard I am pleased to inform you that I was invited to a meeting last month of a small group of States, convened at the initiative of the delegation of the United States, in Washington, D.C. I am grateful to Mr. Larry Snead and his colleagues for this initiative. Views were exchanged at this meeting on one of the more difficult aspects of the draft agreement: the issue of enforcement by non-flag States. As this was a purely informal and exploratory meeting, no conclusions were reached, but I believe that all those present found the dialogue most constructive and the ideas exchanged very useful.

12. Last week I convened an informal meeting, as I had done prior to the last session of the Conference, to consult on the issue of enforcement, and I am grateful to all those delegations that took part. Considerable progress has been made in these consultations on that issue. It is my intention to provide you, in due course, with a revised draft of article 21 for your consideration.

13. This is our last substantive session and we must conclude our work by adopting a final agreement. The programme of work for this session was decided upon at our last session and I see no reason to change that programme. This is a short session and much of the time must be devoted to technical work relating to the finalization of the text and its harmonization in all languages. The Secretariat and the editorial and translation services have already done some preliminary work for our consideration. This is reflected in conference room paper 7. We will also need to look at the draft Final Act of the Conference, which the Secretariat has prepared for us. In addition, we should also look at any remaining issues that might be raised.

14. Our schedule is thus a very tight one and I would urge all of you to focus on those parts of the text that need to be streamlined and not to try to reopen issues that are substantially settled and for which the text has general support. I would like to urge delegations that have particular concerns or suggestions for further improvements to the text to inform me of them as soon as possible in order that we can deal with these in informal consultations, where appropriate. At the same time I must urge delegations to bear in mind that the text as it stands is the product of extensive negotiation and discussion over five previous sessions and reflects a careful balance. In proposing changes, therefore, you should first ask yourselves whether those changes will respect the balance and integrity of the draft agreement as a whole.

15. We have to complete this phase of our work by the middle of next week in order to give the Secretariat time to issue the final text of the draft agreement before its adoption at the end of that week.

16. Since we have decisions to take during this session I urge you to ensure that your credentials are in order. They should be deposited with the Secretariat as required by the rules of procedure.

17. We have much work to do during the next two weeks. I sense there is a strong will and an underlying commitment to complete our work successfully by adopting the agreement. I look forward to working with you during this session to achieve an effective outcome that brings credit to us all and establishes a regime that will secure a sustainable future for the world's straddling fish stocks and highly migratory fish stocks.